Knowledge and Performance in the Early Modern Theatrum Mundi[1]

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Abstract

The widespread use of the metaphor of the theater of the world in many kinds of early modern European writing masks the wide range of meanings the metaphor could convey. The *theatrum mundi* could signify either a turning away from the material world in favor of heaven or the scrupulous study of the visible world; it could emphasize the essential hypocrisy of society as well as the centrality of human action in the world. This doubleness of meaning is as much a part of the theater metaphor as either of its senses and seems to depend on the regular attribution to the theater —metaphorical and actual— of a division between what it represented and the means it used to represent it. This paper argues that our usual understanding of the theater as necessarily divided between a true substance and a false seeming does not necessarily apply to early modern uses of the theater metaphor as a characterization of the process of knowing. Rather, the theater metaphor suggests that knowledge is neither a mere reflection of what is known nor a complete fabrication, but a kind of performance or enactment. The understanding of knowledge as performance allows us to distinguish a theory of knowing that is peculiar to the early modern period, and perhaps that can serve to characterize that period against what comes before it and after it.

Die in vielen europäischen Texten der frühen Neuzeit weit verbreitete Verwendung der Metapher vom Welttheater verdeckt ihr weites Bedeutungsspektrum. Das *Theatrum Mundi* konnte entweder eine Abwendung von der materiellen Welt zugunsten des Himmels oder des gewissenhaften Studiums der sichtbaren Welt bedeuten; es konnte die grundsätzliche Scheinheiligkeit der Gesellschaft ebenso wie die zentrale Bedeutung menschlichen Handelns hervorheben. Dieser heterogene Sinn der Theater-Metapher ist ebenso sehr ein Teil ihrer Bedeutung wie das Konzept von der doppelten Wesenheit des Theaters. Dieser Aufsatz vertritt die These, dass die notwendige Diskrepanz zwischen einer wahren Substanz und einer falschen Bedeutung, von der unser gängiges Verständnis des Theaters notwendigerweise ausgeht, nicht unbedingt für den frühneuzeitlichen Gebrauch der Theater-Metapher zutrifft, der vor allem einen Prozess des Wissens charakterisiert. Hier deutet die Theater-Metapher vielmehr an, dass Wissen weder eine bloße Reflexion des Gewussten noch seine vollständige Erzeugung ist, sondern eine Art Performance oder Darbietung. Das Verständnis von Wissen als Performance erlaubt die Abgrenzung einer Theorie des Wissens, die für die Frühe Neuzeit charakteristisch ist, und womöglich zur Unterscheidung der Epoche von dem dienen kann, was vor ihr und nach ihr kommt.

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The central importance in early modern European writings of the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi*, the theater of the world, needs no further rehearsal. But it may need further explication than critics so far have given it.[2] The apparent obviousness of its meaning, following the magisterial surveys of E.R. Curtius and Lynda Christian, tends to mask the wider variety of senses it could convey. In this article I will begin with two different ways of asking what might seem to be the same question. First, what does this metaphor of the *theatrum mundi* show? Second, what is the work this metaphor does? These slightly differences in phrasing change the question from one about how a metaphor reflects or represents its object to one of its force or performance in doing so. Not accidentally, they mirror what I will argue are the two principal and not wholly reconcilable tenors of the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi* – beholding (historically the dominant and more visible one) and acting. I will argue in this article that the difference between a theater that shows and one in which things are performed or enacted is a crucial one, that at least some writers of the early modern period distinguished these functions in their metaphorical *theatra*, and that this difference is employed to explore the relation between knowledge and ethics in ways that are new to the early modern period.

In this article I place emphasis on the second of my questions – how does the metaphor work? – because it reveals another question, or assumption: in what do we imagine knowledge or knowing to consist? To ask the relation of the *theatrum* metaphor to knowledge presupposes a knowledge that can be represented and displayed for one who is an onlooker, or, in other words, the kind of knowledge that a theory of knowing as representation would seem to require. Of course this concept of knowledge is very old, and has been linked to theatricality since ancient times – it is certainly Hellenistic, appearing in some Stoic writings; in some form Platonic (because Plato's Ideas are beheld in the mind, and the phenomenal world is their representation); perhaps as old as

[2] The foundational text on the metaphor is Curtius, *Europäische Literatur*, followed by Bernheimer (1956:225-247); and the excellent survey of Christian (1987), upon which I have relied heavily. In general, the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi* expresses the insignificance of the present world beside the superior reality of the perspective of eternity outside it. This aspect of the metaphor has been extensively treated. But these readings do not exhaust the uses of the *theatrum* image, which undergoes specific changes particularly in the Renaissance. See Blair (1997:153-179), who makes the point that there are a number of metaphorical theaters in operation in sixteenth-century Europe; also Friedrich (2004:205-232), on the metaphor's decline; and Michel (2004:247-289), on some challenges to it.

Democritus (Christian 1987:1-21).[3] Near the beginning of the seventeenth century Descartes argued afresh that knowledge was a kind of mental representation, in contrast to the realist theories of knowledge current among the Aristotelian and scholastic philosophers, and to some extent the broad and sometimes not fully reflective acceptance of Descartes' theory led to the proliferation of theatrum metaphors in the next century.[4] But the *theatrum mundi* metaphor can also point in another direction, towards another theory of knowing that treated knowledge as made or enacted – or even better, as a process of making or enacting – in experiment and communication alike, and this is what I would like to explore.[5]

The metaphor of the *theatrum mundi* is usually understood to have two significant elements. Primarily, it divides a world of appearances from one of reality and disavows the world of ordinary experience in comparison with this more obscured or removed real world. There is considerable variety in how the real and apparent worlds are defined; the real world is often heaven, but sometimes it is a different experience of this world that became clear only through scrupulous study. Thus in the *Institutes* (1559) John Calvin insistently describes the world as a "mirror" or "spectacle of God's glory" in which God's presence is not fully knowable, but is nevertheless unmistakable. It is visible everywhere, if nowhere completely grasped: "most people, immersed in their own errors, are struck blind in such a dazzling theater."[6] Nonetheless, their beholding of God's theater should lead them to know God: "This magnificent theater of heaven and earth, which is replete with innumerable miracles, and from contemplation of which we ought wisely to acquire the knowledge of God".[7] The non-metaphysical version is more typical of later seventeenth-century writings, as for example Robert Hooke's *Micrographia* (1665), where in-

[3] Christian doubts the authenticity of the references associated with Democritus and Heraclitus, but certainly the Renaissance image of them as the "Laughing and Weeping Philosophers" linked both to the *theatrum mundi*.

[4] Yolton (1975:145-165), argues that in its popularization during the seventeenth century, Descartes' theory itself has not been correctly understood.

[5] For the foundations of this theory of knowledge, see Pérez-Ramos (1988)

[6] Calvin (ed. 1957:61). The mirror and spectacle references may be found in (ed. 1957:69f., 73) and in (ed. 1967:52, 55, 58). Calvin makes additional reference to the world as God's theater in 1. 6. 2, 1. 14. 20 and 2. 6. 1 (quoted below).

[7] Calvin 2.6.1 (ed. 1957:II, 108; ed. 1967:341). See also Christian (1987:95) and Lane (2001).

struments allow a closer and more accurate examination of "the great *Theatre* of the *World*" than is ordinarily seen or expected (Hooke 1665:16; Spiller 2004). Alternatively, as its second element, the metaphor of the world as a theater could emphasize the essential hypocrisy and falseness of people in society rather than the possibility of some realm of clearer perception. In this case, what is more clearly perceived in the *theatrum mundi* is the essential deceptiveness of human existence, "the blindnes of us worldlye folk," (Rodgers ed. 1997:130) as when Thomas More reminds a listener who laughs at a worthless player who is proud of his kingly costume: "Now thinkest thy selfe wyse enough whyle thou art proud in thy players garment, & forgettest that whan the play is done, thou shalt go forth as pore as he" (ed. 1997:130, 156).[8] In both these instances (and there is obviously some overlap) the metaphor emphasizes an inherent duplicity in the world – duplicity because this word captures the sense that doubleness also involves deceit. In both versions, the metaphor divides the world into two parts, and privileges one part over the other.

Most recent interpretations of the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi* have focused on how the metaphor positions its recipients as spectators of the duplicitous stage of the world. The knowledge of the world that the metaphor offers is a look, as it were, behind the scenes; those towards whom the metaphor is directed are the wise or discerning few who see both sides. Their wisdom is both the product and the cause of their detachment from the theater of the world and their ability to be spectators who see the whole rather than blind actors. The metaphor thus proposes an approximate equivalent of the phenomenological epoche; it sets aside the immersive experience in order to analyze it from some securer standpoint offstage. But there is an equally strong, although less strongly noticed, tradition that relates the *theatrum mundi* metaphor primarily to performances on their own terms rather than evacuating what is done in the *theatrum mundi* in favor of what is represented within it. This emphasis is nearly as old as the one more commonly noticed by modern interpreters. It is, for instance, a recurrent feature of Stoic thought that the philosopher is one who recognizes that every person plays a role in life. Epictetus (ed. 1966), for example, warns: "Remember that you are an actor in a drama, of such a kind as the author pleases to make it […]. For this is your

[8] See also Christian (1987:112). Similar sentiments appear in More (1976).

business, to act well the character assigned to you; to choose it is another's."[9] Similar formulations occur in the works of Cicero and Seneca,[10] and appear in early modern works as well, for instance Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* [1509]:

> "If anyone tries to take the masks off the actors when they're playing a scene on the stage and show their true, natural faces to the audience, he'll certainly spoil the whole play…. To destroy the illusion is really to spoil the whole play, for it's really the illusion and make-up which hold the audience's eye" (ed. 1986 [1509]:109).

Stoic versions like these emphasize that the wise man sees through the unreal performances of life, but further insist that he is ethically enjoined to uphold the play even though he does not believe in its reality, or that he sees the aspect of its duplicity. Knowing how and when to perform, in other words, is more central to such uses of the metaphor than to others that are otherwise very close, such as that of Thomas More's confused actor in *Last Thynges* (c. 1522, cited above). More's poor performer mistakes his role for reality, and the poor spectator makes the same mistake with respect to himself; Erasmus' misguided spectator understands the emptiness of performance, but not the social imperative that requires that it be upheld.

Across these differences in emphasis, though, the *theatrum mundi* remains a theater of doubleness. Its remarkable doubleness of meaning seems to depend on the regular attribution to the theater – metaphorical and actual – of a division between what it represents and the means used to represent it. Because of this, the theater metaphor includes the possibility that whatever hierarchy it seems to establish may suddenly find itself subverted by the working-through of the metaphor: that is, the possibility of seeing the reality of the world readily turns into an injunction to behave appropriately, which is to say in accord with mere appearances. But our usual understanding of the theater as necessarily divided between a true substance and a false seeming does not necessarily apply to early modern uses of the theater metaphor as a characterization of the process of knowing. Rather, extending the Stoic usage that foregrounds the knowledge of proper performance in the *theatrum mundi* and the ethical demand to play one's part well, the theater metaphor can suggest that

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[9] For a fuller discussion of the metaphor in Stoic thought, see Christian (1987:16-23).

[10] E.g., Cicero, *De Senectute* 19. 70, imagines life as a play whose excellence is more important than its length; Seneca, *Epistle* 80. 6-8, comments on how badly we play our allotted parts in life.

knowledge is neither a mere reflection of what is known nor a complete fabrication, but a performance or enactment that produces reality. Such a handling of the metaphor is not in the final analysis dualistic. Cast in this light, many instances of the theater metaphor in early modern writers may need to be reevaluated. Another use of the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi*, deeply invested in attention as a kind of performance, develops in the seventeenth century from these earlier beginnings, which did not try to point out the world's essential duplicity. Rather, it explored how human engagement and human acting – and here we should hear the root of the word *actor* as well – become knowing: not through seeing, in other words, but through doing.

Many familiar and important references to the *theatrum mundi* acknowledge the possibility not only that one man in his time plays many parts, but that one of the parts that might be played was that of spectator. John of Salisbury, who in *Policraticus* (1159) seems to have been the first to use both the phrase *theatrum mundi* and to observe that *totus mundus agit histrionem* ("the whole world plays the actor") clarified that "since all are playing parts, there must be some spectators" (1159 [ed. 1848]: III:187f.)[11]. John called these spectators "wise men," *sapientes*, although it is not clear whether they are wise because they are spectators or they are spectators because they are wise – or both simultaneously. Significantly, in John's original theater, the spectators are not entirely distinct from the actors; they are one group of actors among others, although privileged by their understanding of the world's duplicity, but like everybody else they play their parts under the eyes of God. Here John combines the classical (and traditional) metaphor of the world as a theater for observing with the claims of Paul in *1 Corinthians* 4:9 that Christians are in a sense its performers, "like a theater [Greek *theatron*; Latin *spectaculum*] for the world."[12] As I have argued, the *theatrum mundi* metaphor usually emphasizes the position of the spectator, but – as *Policraticus* suggests – from its outset, the metaphorical spectator can always seem to be playing a part as well, thus diminishing the importance of the difference between actor and onlooker. The

[11] Giles (ed. 1848: III:187f.). The earlier quotation appears in *Policratus* III.8 (Salisbury 1159 [ed. 1848]:III, 183). On the originality of John's phrases, see Christian (1987:67; 238f.).

[12] Paul continues in *1 Corinthinas* 4:10 that "We are fools for Christ's sake" – part of the deep theatrical inspiration for Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*.

metaphor of the *theatrum mundi* thus offers from its earliest post-classical use the potential for a radically different sense.

This other sense appears in a trope that was initially separate from the *theatrum mundi* but which was frequently associated with it, the emblem of the philosophers Heraclitus and Democritus watching the spectacle of humanity, with one weeping in pity and the other laughing at its comedy. This image has little to do with the actual philosophies of either of these two figures, and the comparison dates back only to imperial Rome, where it appears in well-known passages of Juvenal and Seneca. It was fully taken up during the Renaissance by writers like Michel de Montaigne, Pierre Boiaistuau, and Robert Burton.[13] Seneca explains that the divergent responses of these two wise philosophers to human experience show that "everything is either to be laughed at or wept over"[14] ("aut ridenda omnia aut flenda sunt"). In his essay "De Democritus et Heraclitus", Montaigne explicates the presentation of the philosophers given by Juvenal:

> "Democritus and Heraclitus were two Philosophers, of whom the first, finding the condition of man vain and ridiculous, never went out in public but with a mocking and laughing face; whereas Heraclitus, having pity and compassion on this same condition of ours, wore a face perpetually sad, and eyes filled with tears" (ed. 1957:220; orig. in ed. 1965 [1595]:303).

Montaigne uses this image to conclude an essay in which he muses on the partiality of his own judgments, in both senses: the bias they display, and the incompleteness from which that bias springs. This recalls another passage in *1 Corinthians*: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (13:11). In contrast to divine knowledge, human knowledge is partial; it is imperfect but will be perfected. It is not, then, necessarily duplicitous. Likewise, for Montaigne the *theatrum mundi* signifies not duplicity but partiality "I do not see the whole of anything; nor do those who promise to show it to us" (ed. 1957:219). Because of this partiality, the *theatrum* reveals the activity of the spectator, whose unique viewpoint not only shapes his understanding of the world but his action within it. For Montaigne also insists that the spectator is not simply

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13 Juvenal, *Satire* X. 27-35; Seneca, *De ira* 2. 10. 5. See Boaistuau (1566).

14 Seneca, *De ira* 2. 10. 5

a philosopher who does not enter the theater himself. Rather, Montaigne's viewing of things leads to action, although not to complete knowledge: "I take the first subject that chance offers […]". Indeed, viewing itself is a minimal kind of action that shows the world to us and us to the world: "Every movement reveals us" (ed. 1957:219). For Montaigne, there is no escaping the fundamental honesty of action, so that every act becomes a means, at least potentially, to a never-completed task of self-discovery that combines knowledge with ethics, because it always concerns behavior as well as knowledge: "[…] whatever role a man undertakes to play, he always plays his own at the same time."[15]

Like Montaigne, Robert Burton uses the image of Democritus and Heraclitus to stage watching and writing in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1638 [ed. 1989]) in complex relation to the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi*. The opening lines of the prose note "To the Reader" invoke the metaphor, but explicitly from the point of view of the actor rather than the spectator:

> "Gentle Reader, I presume thou wilt be very inquisitive to know what Anticke or Personate Actor this is, that so insolently intrudes upon this common Theater, to the worlds view, arrogating another mans name […]"(Burton 1638 [ed. 1989]: I,1).

But the possibility of observation concerns Burton less than the necessity of performance. Despite his self-presented melancholy, Burton represents himself as an heir to the laughing philosopher, styling himself "Democritus Junior". This is of course within the tradition of the philosopher as what Burton calls a "meere spectator of other mens fortunes and adventures, and how they act their parts, which me thinkes are diversly presented unto me, as from a common Theater or Sceane" (1638 [ed. 1989]: I, 4). But as Burton's task of writing goes on, it becomes apparent that Burton's *theatrum* is one he cannot exit. He is, in other words, an actor as much as an onlooker. What he observes, in the first case, is not only the world as its "meere spectator" but himself as his own theater: "as *Democritus* in his Garden, [I] lead a Monastique life, *ipse mihi theatrum* […]" (1638 [ed. 1989]: I, 4). Within the theater of himself, Democritus Junior too must play a part. But what Democritus traditionally laughed at was precisely the emptiness of the roles people played. Burton's viewpoint does not free him from the comical delusions of human activity. Burton neatly sets

[15] "That to Philosophize is to Learn to Die" (ed. 1957:56).

up his own position as an endlessly inverting series of paradoxes – a theater within a theater, a spectator of his own actions, an actor playing the part of an actor.

> "Tis not onely *Democritus* will serve turne to laugh in these daies, wee have now need of a *Democritus to laugh at Democritus*… A great *Stentorian Democritus*, as big as that *Rhodian Colossus*. For now, as *Salisburiensis* said in his time, *totus mundus histrionem agit*, the whole world plaies the Foole; we have a new Theater, a new Sceane, a new Commedy of Errors, a new company of personate Actors […]" (1638 [ed. 1989]: I, 37).

Knowledge here is not finally Burton's or Democritus' first aim – the goal of the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, or at least its result, is not to analyze melancholy, but to produce a remedy for it by entirely inhabiting it, by acting in it without reserve despite one's awareness of the ridiculousness of human life. Burton's premise in his encyclopedic work is that he is undertaking a complete examination of melancholy in all its many forms, hoping incidentally that the pressure of the scholarly project will occupy him and distract him from his own melancholy: "I write of Melancholy, by being busie to avoid Melancholy" (1638 [ed. 1989]: I, 37). Knowledge, insofar as it comes at all – and it comes distinctly second to effects – is not articulation of melancholy, but immersion in it. The achievement is finally not representation but impersonation or, better, ritual activity, and though imperfectly, relief.

For Burton, spectation is a kind of action, but more importantly, action is what has the potential to free the mind. This performative emphasis is in contrast to the usually acknowledged meaning of the *theatrum mundi* as a site of knowing. Other early modern writers more overtly link the *theatrum mundi* to performance. In the tradition of his friends Erasmus and More, Juan Luis Vives' *Fabula de homine* (1518; ed. 1738:387-393; Engl. transl. ed. 1948:3-8) represents the *theatrum mundi* expressly from the point of view of the self-conscious performer. Vives turns the metaphor into a brief allegory: Jupiter gathers the other gods as if in a theater to entertain them with the astonishing sights the world presents. The most amazing sight of all, though, is man, who proves capable of performing the parts of all the other inhabitants of the world. As the gods applaud, man finally enters disguised as Jupiter, momentarily confusing the gods, who mistake him for Jupiter himself. After this *tour de force*, "man was recalled from the stage, seated by Mercury among the gods, and

proclaimed victor" (Vives ed. 1948:390). The gods insist that man has shown himself worthy to dwell among them, and invite him to join them as spectators of the theater of the world. Nonetheless, man chooses to return and continue his playing. Unlike Erasmus' and More's versions of the *theatrum mundi*, Vives' does not rest on the theater's duplicity, nor even, like those of Montaigne or Burton, on its partiality. Rather, he suggests that the site of knowledge is not watching the theater but acting in it and thus *making* knowledge.[16] On the other hand, Vives keeps the making of knowledge distinct from seeing it; knowledge is still the province of those rare philosophers who can be spectators of the world's stage as well as actors on it. Acting and knowing, in other words, remain distinct activities for Vives, although which is important is not entirely clear.

Both knowledge and self-knowledge arise in the gap between spectator and actor; clarity is gained by giving up performing and taking up looking on. But performance in various ways has powerful attractions of its own – Burton attempts his cure by acting as much as by watching, and Vives' human player declines to stay with the gods and returns to earthly performance. In Vives, such a performance could be repeated, with the player taking first one position then the other alternatively. A performance might also be liminal, signaling not only a change in the game being played but a real change in the status of the players. Descartes (ed. Gombray n.d.) marked the first lines of his *Cogitationes Privatae* (January 1, 1619) as just such a liminal moment: "As comic actors, being careful that shame not show on their faces, put on masks: so I, about to ascend the theater of the world, in which till now I have lived as a spectator, enter with a mask" (see Browne 1977). In this introduction, Descartes shifts the frame of reference entirely: science is action, and spectation is only a preparation for knowledge rather than knowledge itself. Descartes changes roles within the *theatrum mundi* and presents the experience as a coming-forth that does not yield superior, or indeed even different, knowledge; it simply positions him differently with respect to the knowledge that the world provides. The change of position is also a real and permanent one. But the other crucial difference between Descartes and most writers before him is his valorization of action. Earlier texts tend to make the spectator

[16] For a reading of Vives' *Fabula* in the context of his other writings, see Colish (1962).

the position of knowledge; in Descartes, the spectator gives way to the performer; watching is a mere propaedeutic to acting on the world's stage.

To find knowledge in performance puts things on an entirely different footing than the way that the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi* is usually interpreted. Rather than offering an object for vision, the *theatrum mundi* becomes a place of action. But it also reveals how knowledge of how things are shades into ethics about how to attend to them and respond to them. The emblem of the laughing and weeping philosophers suggests that knowledge is not objective, not merely in the sense that it depends on a particular viewpoint and comes with an individual bias or slant, but that knowledge is realized only in an attitude towards its objects. Knowledge is thus also a way of behaving towards things – pitying them, being amused by them, but above all being absorbed into their world and not standing aside from it. Insofar as the *theatrum mundi* is about beholding a world presented for show, the metaphor represents knowledge, but insofar as it is about the ways of responding to one's beholding – how one acts as one knows, and how one's acts contribute to one's knowledge – these versions of the *theatrum mundi* represent performance. In *De Constantia* (1584), Justus Lipsius introduces the *theatrum mundi* metaphor not to suggest the possibility of philosophical knowledge of the world, but to suggest the temptations of dissimulation, which are so compelling that they can fool even those who use them:

> "You play a comedy, and under the mask of your homeland, you curse your private misfortunes and you mourn with sobbing tears. The judge [*Arbiter*] says *the whole world plays the actor*. Certainly this is so[…]. Set aside your mask, actor: this is because of you."[17]

Lipsius proposes the ethical problem of how to act rather than a strictly epistemological one of what to believe. Still more interesting is Sir Thomas Browne's idea of the *theatrum* as an entirely internal, ethical battleground. Although elsewhere he made the more conventional use of the image, he also considers the *theatrum* as mere combat, in which there is no feigning but only contest, and the stakes are not true knowledge but right performance:

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[17] Lipsius, *De Constantia*, 12; see (1595 [1584]):19), although I have not followed this somewhat loose translation. The reference to "Arbiter" in the Latin may either be to a judge or to Petronius Arbiter, author of *Satyricon* and reputedly Nero's master of revels, to whom the phrase "the whole world plays the actor" had been attributed since John of Salisbury – incorrectly, according to Christian (1987).

> "Be not a *Hercules Furens* abroad, and a Poltron within thy self […]. To well manage our Affections and wild Horses of Plato, are the highest Circenses; and the noblest Digladiation is in the Theater of our selves: for therein our inward Antagonists […] fall upon us" (ed. 1964:252).

Browne's theater is close to Montaigne's, except that his emphasis is almost entirely on the testing that the theater of the internal world offers. It is not a place of passive beholding at all – the observation one does in Browne's theater is entirely of one's own behavior as virtuous or vicious. It is an interior arena where the spectacle one watches is of oneself in action. What one learns in such a theater is how to judge the ethics of one's own actions. Here the spectator and the actor cannot be separated, because only the actor makes the spectator's part meaningful.

Most fifteenth- and sixteenth-century *theatra* claim to produce knowledge by allowing the viewer to see at a glance that what they had thought of as knowledge was all wrong, even when as in the Stoic version they demand fidelity to those roles or as in the neoplatonic version they allow for productive improvisation and an eventual progression from stage to audience. But the claim of totalizing that is made in them is frequently fragmented by the attention given to the role of actual performing. In performance, the clear vision of theatrical and real existence collapses into a single level of perception – that of the actors, who see what they are doing without stepping outside it, so that knowledge and the actor occupy the same space. Most broadly, the lesson of these theaters is how to attend to something, as French, Italian, English, and Latin all concur in their vocabulary: the theater is the realm of *entendement* (understanding as judgment, the subject of Montaigne's essays 1. 20 and 1. 50), the *uomo intendente* who sees life as a play through attending to it,[18] the "understanding man" of Ben Jonson and other Elizabethan critics and dramatists (West 2006), the *conspicientes* of John of Salisbury and others. The attention of the actor-spectator makes the broken spectacle of the theater whole. He performs the opposite of analysis, which is represented as happening as it were by itself under the spectators' passive eyes.

As the seventeenth century unfolded, more and more writers who drew on the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi* must have experienced an actual play in per-

[18] E.g., Patrizi (1560:IX); see Christian (1987:87-89).

formance, in distinction to earlier ones who may have been working through the metaphor as something that was itself figurative, based, that is, on an idea of what a theater should be rather than on actual theaters (West 2002:43-78). Framing rather than feigning becomes the center of this use of the metaphor, although it is one that modern readers are less likely to recognize. Framing of course also allows for theatrical duplicity – it makes one world inside another. But while the *theatrum mundi* offered a space set apart from the world, it could emphasize that, rightly or wrongly, the stakes were real to the players. Francis Bacon had a particularly vexed and involved relation with the idea of the theater, although as I am arguing it was not wholly an unusual one among those who employed the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi* (which was just about anyone writing on the subject of knowledge in the seventeenth century). What was unusual in Bacon was the explicitness of his engagement with both actual theaters and metaphorical ones, most clearly in his discussion of what he calls the Idols of the Mind, those delusions to which human thought is naturally prone.[19] The Idols of the Theater, unlike the other sorts, "are not innate, nor do they steal into the understanding secretly, but are plainly impressed and received into the mind from the play-books of philosophical systems and the perverted rules of demonstration" (*Novum Organum* 1. 61):

> "And in the plays of this philosophical theater you may observe the same thing which is found in the theater of the poets, that stories invented for the stage are more compact and more elegant, and more as one would wish them to be, than true stories out of history" (*Novum Organum* 1. 62).

The carefully chosen duplicity of Bacon's word *theater* suggests both the risks of relying on the accidents of language and the need for minute observation to discern the crucial differences that separate fact from fiction. The philosophical theater is where old knowledge is performed over and over again. To replace it, Bacon proposes two alternative theaters: books of aphorisms, which require the reader's active engagement, and the scientific experiment, where the drama of discovery really takes place.

[19] Much of my discussion of Bacon here draws on West (2002; ch. 6, 193-223). Bacon discusses the Idols of the Mind in Bacon, *Valerius Terminus*, (ed. 1957-1974: III, 241f., 245); the Idols are also discussed in two separate précis of chapter 16 of *Novum Organum*. Only three types are mentioned in the later *De Augmentis* (1623), which I discuss below.

Bacon's attempt to recover experience for knowledge returns to the metaphor of the theater but with an even stronger emphasis on the importance of the action within it. The moderns have exceeded the ancients, he observes, not because they have set the theater aside, but because they have substituted a new theater of experience for the older one of fantasy: "they come on the scene and perform new plays, neither honored by applause nor graceful in their plots."[20] Rather than devise intricate theoretical systems, modern investigators carried out experiments whose results may be less satisfying but that reveal the way things actually work. In the disorganized, somewhat desperate text *Sylva Sylvarum* (1626) written while he was in political disgrace and published posthumously, Bacon presents a mixed set of observations, suggestions, and desiderata for erecting a structure of knowledge. It is based on the idea that knowledge will come neither from blind activity nor passive watching, but from their combination in setting up circumstances and carefully observing and recording their outcomes. Bacon's preferred term for these entries is 'experiment'. Bacon is quite specific throughout about the need for performing in order to gather knowledge. Other natural histories, "being gathered for Delight and Use, are full of pleasant Descriptions and Pictures; and affect and seek after Admiration, Rarities, and Secrets" (ed. 1626). Rather than anything to be looked at, he imagines his work as a space of labor "the Erecting and Building of a true *Philosophy*: For the Illumination of the *Understanding*; the Extracting of *Axiomes*; and the producing of many Noble *Works*, and *Effects*"(ed. 1626:s.p.).[21] Here, work produces works – the *theatrum mundi* is not a display but a factory. In particular, Bacon sees himself not as the theater's spectator, but (not without irritation) as the sole architect, craftsman, and even menial laborer of the building of knowledge.[22] Bacon's program of experimentation relies finally on performance in a literal sense – the work of the actor within the theater to set up his own observations.

One striking example takes place literally on a stage:

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[20] "scaenas tentarunt, & novas Fabulas egerunt, nec plausu celebres, nec argumento elegantes" (Bacon 1622:3f.).

[21] – a theater, although he never says so?

[22] "And in this behalfe, I have heard his Lordship speake complainingly; That his Lordship (who thinketh hee deserveth to be an Architect in this building,) should be forced to be a Work-man and a Labourer; And to digge the Clay, and burne the Brick […] For he knoweth, that except hee doe it, nothing will be done:[…]" (Bacon ed. 1626:s.p.).

> "An emperor of Rome, to show the certainty of his hand, did shoot a great forked arrow at an ostrich, as she ran swiftly upon the stage, and struck off her head; and yet she continued the race a little way with her head off" (ed. 1626:IV,400).

Here a theater of display gives way to a theater of experience – seeking to show off his own skill, the unnamed emperor accidentally offers a demonstration of how some animals retain motion for a short time after death. Although the location of this experiment in an actual theater is anomalous, its theatrical structure is typical for Bacon's experiments, which are always presented more or less tacitly as reworking of the theater in such a way as to make it productive of knowledge rather than of fictions or desires. The way to do this, for Bacon, is to emphasize the work of performance in the *theatrum mundi*, showing how those within who pose as spectators in fact produce what they see by their actions, even the minimal action of expectant watching. In particular, Bacon shows how watching is preceded by work of very specific kinds. *Sylva Sylvarum* is full of imperatives: "Dig a pit […]" "Take a glass […]" "To make an exact trial of it […]". Its readers are its actors, although they neither follow a script nor distinguish a real world from a fictive one. Their play instead unfolds the world of things to them. The theater of the experiment allows this to happen by framing an experience. Unlike Descartes, who represents the conversion from spectator to actor as a liminal one, Bacon sees them as alternating, and, importantly, both are actions. Actors and spectators are not different for Bacon, except in their immediate functions or, perhaps, roles.

Bacon's experimental program remained largely imaginary; certainly his grand claims for a new, experimentally-based understanding of the world went unfulfilled, and were probably unfulfillable. Performance in the metaphors of the *theatrum mundi* comes most clearly into focus when the *theatrum* investigates what is contrary to fact – what is not the case. Here the passive spectator and the active one are most fully distinct. This seems an almost perverse response to Bacon's insistence on experiment and writing as performances within a theater, but in fact it is a nearly inevitable development within it. Since performance is not regarded in this particular set of applications of the metaphor as feigning, but as doing, effort or performance is ultimately most visible as that which catalogues and clears away false belief – Bacon's Idols of the Theater, which must be dispelled by careful and effortful attention to things, by the work of bringing things to light. The text of *Sylva Sylvarum*

demands its reader's active attention to organize it. Even Bacon acknowledged, according to his chaplain William Rawley, that the book looked like "an Indigested Heap of Particulars; And cannot have that Lustre, which Books cast into Methods have", but it was Bacon's claim that the beholder's work of organizing the scattered experiments into coherent structures was the task that completed the experiments.[23] Experiment is a kind of theatrical performance of its own, of course, but it is one from which the work of judgment has been stripped by a prior performance of things. But when the *theatrum* returns to textuality, the work it requires is precisely one of judgment, for its appropriate recognition. And inevitably the theater of experiment does return to texts, if only because despite their insistence on the fact, early modern performers of knowledge did not and could not work alone.[24] Writings of the seventeenth century present the new knower through experience and experiment as an individual hero of knowledge, an agent who unifies in his person the variety of the *theatrum* by his unique experience in it – the *polyhistor*, Bacon, Galileo, Descartes (Steadman 1971:3-47; Zedelmaier 2002:412-450). Thomas Browne, though, did not: he regretted the singularity of his investigations, "humbly acknowledging a worke of such concernment unto truth, and difficulty in it selfe, did well deserve the conjunction of many heads" (1646:1). But as he goes on, it becomes apparent that in a text that investigates and rejects what is not the case, it is above all necessary that the writer be one man, even more than those heroic individuals who uncovered positive truths. The reason, as Browne avers, is that whereas the truth is singular and so can be revealed from many sides, error is protean and infinite. Only God is free from "the impossible society of error"; for humans, "opinions are free, and open it is for any to thinke or declare the contrary" (1646:4).

Sir Thomas Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646) is an explicit response to Bacon's plea for a clearing of the intellectual field, the first work before experimentation can begin to build a true structure of things. Descartes' insistence on clearing away the received structures and assumptions of thought in the *Meditations* is analogous in purpose, and a similar manifestation of the work

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[23] *SS*, Browne (1646:sig. A). Much recent work has been done on the active nature of early modern reading; see in particular Jardine / Grafton (1990).

[24] On the assumption of the convertability of text and knowledge, the assumed "Schriftmäßigkeit allen Wissens", see Müller (1998).

that the theater entails. Browne's text is meant to provide a similar clearing away of false beliefs about natural science, those false teachings that the title warns are spread throughout the populace. Although nature and God are repeatedly held up by Browne as final arbiters, it is apparent that there is no direct revelation, no moment of the clarity and unveiling that the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi* can seem to promise. Browne's discussion repeatedly demonstrates that the most carefully designed stagings always rely on further human intervention. Browne's writing reveals is the mediacy of the *theatrum mundi* with no spectators who are not also and always actors: somebody somewhere is having an experience, but that must be reliably played out in a more visible, more reproducible space. For Browne, the recording of experiment and the weighing of one account against another is as much a part of the whole performance as the experiment itself. The sifting of accounts – which one can easily imagine could be cast as the fullest example of standing aside to watch – is part of the ongoing play through which the *theatrum mundi* is mapped:

> "We have enough to do to make up our selves from present and passed times, and the whole stage of things scarce serveth for our instruction. A compleat peece of vertue must be made up from *Centos* of all ages, as all the beauties of *Greece* could make but one handsome *Venus*" (1658:A3^{v}-A4).

Through their textual performances, and the performances that render their texts performances, writers like Browne allow for the reentry of experimental work like William Gilbert's into the world as thought, the cognition of things. The cognition and circulation of things in this *theatrum mundi* is thus turned over to a process of ongoing performance, repeatedly, indeed continually authorized by the speechless being of Nature herself. But what Browne calls "the whole stage of things" is not enough. Nature, although the final arbiter, cannot speak directly; she needs a mouthpiece. This takes the form of an actor, not one who feigns but one who utters or makes manifest the hidden script. But Browne's own work of beholding – acts of writing, recording, and organizing – crowns all. Reading and assembling the centos of other spectators and staging flow seamlessly together in Browne's image of how the knowledge of the world is to be performed. In this theater, as Francis Bacon had earlier suggested, the stagings of nature are not for those who would merely watch: "men must know, that in this theater of man's life (*humanae vitae theatro*) it is

reserved only for God and angels to be lookers on" (ed. 1857-1874:V:8, VII:718).

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